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10405
Lewisia redeviva

The bitterroot, Lewisia redeviva, is a rock garden plant of outstanding merit, the best of the Lewisii. It is easy to handle, curious, but handsome in appearance, interesting in history and in habit of growth.

The type specimen was collected near the mouth of Lolo creek, about twelve miles south of Missoula, Montana, by Capt. Meriweather Lewis of the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1806. Lewis had seen the root of the plant the previous summer among some dried foods abandoned by a party of Indians; but failed to find the living plant that season. Lewis carried his specimens the 3,000 miles of his return trip and turned his entire collection over to Dr. Frederick Pursh for determination. Sometime later Dr. Pursh, while studying the plants collected by the expedition, discovered that one of the bitterroots that had been dried and pressed showed signs of life. He planted it in the garden of a Mr. McMayon in Philadelphia and there it continued to live for sometime. This incident suggested for the plant its specific name, redeviva, or the plant that returned to life. I verified this story one spring when I kept some plants in a plant press under a 100 pound weight, between blotters, sunned and changed daily, from March 25 to May 25, after which one of the plants continued to grow, a permanent addition to my garden.

The bitterroot, which is the state flower of Montana, has given the name to a range of mountains, a river and a fertile valley in western Montana. The plant puts out leaves in winter or early spring, either a rosette spread close to the ground or erected to form a tuft suggesting a tiny clump of some coarse grass. When dug, the reddish, fleshy roots that tend to draw up over the short crown, with its tuft of green leaves suggests some big bug. The flowers are large and cactus-like, usually pink; but varying from white to red. A well established plant sometimes produces a large number of these handsome blossoms, 67 on one plant that I counted. Usually by May, or when the weather gets hot, the leaves have shriveled up, like a rubber band on a hot stove, and drawn into the soil around the plant's crown so that only flower stems are to be seen at blooming time. The rich, cactus-like blossoms do not shed their petals; but dry up entire, the seeds ripening within the flower. After the seeds have ripened, the stem detaches below the flower permitting the faded blossoms to roll about with the wind and scatter the seeds, which under favorable conditions, may produce plants the size of a pin by fall, and flowers the 3rd. year. The stem, its labor finished, draws into the soil and the plant disappears completely until cool weather and time again to produce the owl-like leaves.

Bitterroot used to be highly prized by the Indians as food, for it supplied the starch lacking in their essentially meat diet. Large parties camped each spring at the base of the Bitter Root Mountains while the squaws and children dug the year's supply. The root was dried and boiled like beans or ground and used as flour. Now the younger generations have adopted the white man's potato and wheat and less of the bitterroot is gathered, though each year a number of camps may be seen about Missoula which has always been considered the finest collecting area of the plant's rather restricted range.

Bitterroot seems immune to drought or root exposure. It will accept any near neutral soil, but it will not tolerate a wet crown. It must be given a sunny site and perfect drainage. The bed should be raised above the surrounding area and the subsoil should be porous. Its soil may be rich in humus, like decayed sods, or may be fertilized with well rotted cow manure, the rich soil stimulating larger and richer colored flowers. A rich humus overlain by 2" to 4" of barren gravel is good. Thorough watering is best during the growing season, or when the leaves are green, with a drought following the flowering season. Leave the roots undisturbed through the dormant season. Owing to its exacting soil and drainage requirements, and its habit of disappearing after flowering, the bitterroot will never escape from cultivation or become a pest. Lewisia redeviva adds interest and beauty to any rockery, garden or window-box. Plant it in abundance.

At home with the Lewisia redeviva in Nature's rock garden, we find a number of attractive plants. The moss pink, Douglasia montana, hugs close to the ground its green cushion covered early with a multitude of pink blossoms scarcely larger than pin heads. As the days grow warmer, Phlox douglasii, ssp. missoulaensis, transforms a gray-green mound to pale blue with flowers produced in reckless abundance. Often so closely associated with one of these as to appear a part of the same plant, the gray Eriogonum ovalifolium, a dwarf, wild buckwheat displays numerous, cream to pink heads on 8" stems. The very compact Erigeron compositus, with white daisies on 6" stems, and the grass-like sandwort, Arenaria lithophila, with small, white, star-like flower clusters, may be classed also with the choice plants of this site. Pentstemon eriantherus, P. missouliensis, Potentilla convallaria, Senecio canus, Silversia ciliata and others add variety of a less compact type.

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